

# EFFECTS OF STRATEGY IMPLEMENTATION IN THE SCOPE OF LIFE SKILLS AT HEALTH PROMOTING SCHOOL. CASE STUDY

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## **Abstract:**

World Health Organization defines life skills (psychosocial) as the abilities for positive and adaptive behavior that enables individuals to deal effectively with the tasks (demands) and challenges of everyday life. They include basic skills which help promote mental well-being, interpersonal relationships and behavior facilitating health and specific skills which help to cope with threats. The above-mentioned skills are an important field of health education which is compulsory in all Polish schools. However, the schools which promote health have the most significant achievements. The aim of the article is to show experience arising from the strategy implementation of the above skills in one of the first schools promoting health in Poland. The school implemented the idea in 1992 and has a Certificate of European School Promoting Health [*Certyfikat Europejskiej Szkoły Promującej Zdrowie*].

## **Key words:**

health education, school promoting health, life skills

## **Introduction**

Shaping of young people who are capable of functioning well in the modern world is currently a great challenge for all educational environments, especially for the modern school. Therefore, its key target, apart from transmission of knowledge, should be the shaping of the so-called life skills, thanks to which children and young people are able to cope with tasks and challenges of every-day life, fulfill their plans and deal with threats. In order to shape such stances and behaviour types in the group of children and youth, it is first of all necessary to shape the awareness of teachers, tutors, head masters, pedagogues and school psychologists, along with health promotion coordinators, in this respect.

It is also worth adding that cooperation of teachers working in the same school is significant. This is emphasized by Ocetkiewicz (2010), who discussed various forms of cooperation among teachers. The author refers to two scales for measuring cooperation among teachers: within the scope of teaching and within the scope of other areas.

Life skills are psychical and social competences along with interpersonal skills that help people make just decisions, solve problems, think critically and creatively, communicate efficiently, build healthy relations, identify with others, deal with and manage one's own life in a healthy and effective manner (WHO 2003, Todorovska-Sokolovska, 1993; Wojnarowska, Kapica, 2001; Mangrulkar, Vince Whitman, Posner, 2001). It is especially important that physical education teachers who, in the opinion of W. Kulesza (2003), are responsible for pro-healthy stances of children and school youth, possess such competences.

The main objective of implementing them to the system of education is shaping socially acceptable types of behaviour and developing the immunity of young people within the scope of civilizational challenges. B. Wojnarowska (2000) presents two groups of skills differentiated by WHO (1993, 1997):

**Basic skills** for every-day life enabling good mood, interpersonal relations and behaviour types conducive to health, encompassing five categories:

1. Making decisions and solving problems;
2. Creative thinking and critical thinking;
3. Effective communication and maintenance of good interpersonal relations;
4. Self-awareness and empathy;
5. Dealing with emotions and stress management.

**Specific skills** enabling dealing with threats, e.g. assertive refusal to take drugs, have sex, participate in acts of violence, vandalism, etc. They are developed in combination with basic skills.

Life skills are an important area in health education; therefore, they were introduced in Poland to the core curriculum in 2008. Requirements regarding shaping of such skills are contained in the curricula of multiple subjects. They are also a key element of prophylactic programmes and many educational programmes of the school (Regulation of the Ministry of National Education, Journal of Laws 2009, No. 4, item 17). The strategy of their development is "a bridge between health education and prophylactics" (Ostaszewski, 2011); thence, the superior objective is development of the habit of caring for one's own health and the health of others in pupils, as well as the ability of creating a health-conducive environment. Since 2012, all schools in Poland on every level of education have the obligation of implementing health education (Regulation of the Ministry of National Education, Journal of Laws 2012.977 of August 30, 2012).

This is consistent with the initiative of WHO and UNICEF which, meeting the needs of young people half way, proposed introduction of an approach oriented at development of life skills to schools, via integration of teaching of all subjects at school. Their implementation is made gradually throughout the entire period of a child's education (<http://www.unicef.org/lifeskills/>, date of access: 30.11.2013).

Special role in promotion of health and implementation of life skills is played by Health Promoting Schools, i.e. schools where health education is extended and treated as a lifelong process. These schools are obliged to create proper conditions and undertake activities that are conducive for welfare of all members of the school society, to implement proper tasks conducive to development of competences, to undertake activities for the benefit of own health and the health of others and to create a healthy environment. It is worth emphasizing that these are very general assumptions, due to the fact that every school has a possibility of creating its own vision (Wojnarowska, 2012).

The beginning of operation of Health Promoting Schools is combined with the strategy introduced in 1991 by WHO by initiation of a pilot project in Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia and Hungary. In 1992, a European Network of Health Promoting Schools was established; Poland was accepted in the group of first seven countries (Wojnarowska, 2012; Parsons, Stears, 1996; Jensen, Simowska, 2002).

## Material and Method

The objective of this article is to show the experiences resulting from the implementation strategy of life skills in one of the first health promoting schools in Poland and the first one in Kraków, which has been implementing this idea since 1992.

This is Complex of Comprehensive and Integration Schools No. 5 in Kraków (<http://www.gim49krakow.neostrada.pl>; date of access: 10.12.2013).

The mission of Complex of Schools No. 5 is ongoing, systematic creation of a model of a Health Promoting School in the aspects of integration teaching, environmental education and sports, ensuring reliable and modern education enabling comprehensive development of young man's personality, allowing for creative and independent discovery and development of their potential (<http://www.gim49krakow.neostrada.pl>; date of access: 10.12.2013).

The school specializes in: integration teaching, promotion of health in the areas of psychological, physical, social and spiritual health, shaping the environmental awareness of the school community, developing a safe school by teachers, pupils and parents in cooperation with the local environment, cooperation with schools in Europe for the purpose of practical learning of foreign languages and preparation for being a European, promotion of young talents and development of able pupils, propagation of a healthy life style via movement, development of physical dexterity and healthy eating.

When trying to analyze the implementation of the idea of a Health Promoting School within the scope of health education and implementation of life skills in Complex of Comprehensive and Integration Schools No. 5 in Kraków, the following school documents have been analyzed:

1. charter of the school;
2. personal development programme;
3. school prevention programme;
4. evaluation report prepared by the Małopolska Education Authority.

Moreover, interviews with teaching staff were performed:

- Ms. Zofia Piber, who actively participated in creating the model and the strategy of the Health Promoting School by holding the position of the deputy head master and coordinator of the School Team for Health Promotion;
- Ms. Małgorzata Sulisz, who works as a school teacher (job seniority: 21 years, higher studies on psychology and post-graduate studies on pedagogy);
- Ms. Dorota Słowik, who is a speech therapist (working professionally for 22 years, higher studies on special pedagogy at the University of Wrocław and Post-Graduate Speech Therapy Study – Pedagogical University of Kraków);
- Ms. Renata Śliwak, who works as a teacher/ librarian (working professionally for 23 years, higher studies on librarianship and scientific information at the Pedagogical University of Kraków and post-graduate studies on oligophrenic pedagogy at the Pedagogical University of Kraków).

Whilst analyzing school documents and talking to the respondents, attempts were made to answer the question: what are the effects of implementing the idea of health education and life skills in Complex of Comprehensive and Integration Schools No. 5 in Kraków, noticed in the attitudes and behaviour of pupils, teachers and parents?

On the basis of analysis of documents and the conducted interview with the coordinator of the School Team for Health Promotion, it was determined that activities related to health education, combined with implementation of life skills are contained in all documents standardizing the operation of the school, i.e. in the School Charter, Personal Development Programme, School Prevention Programme, work plans of class tutors and didactic plans combined with the core curriculum. What is more, a subject entitled "Education on Family Life" was also introduced.

According to the statement of the coordinator of the School Team for Health Promotion, assumptions regarding health education contained in the above documents and consistently implemented in the course of almost twenty years resulted in a number of

positive changes in many areas of operation of the school. As emphasized by the coordinator, it is very easy to notice them in the physical environment; they are more difficult to be perceived in the social environment. Nevertheless, via systematic operation of the school, the school climate has significantly improved. The above effect was obtained by development and shaping of life skills in the group of teachers, pupils and parents by means of workshops organized in the area of the school and outside of it. An important accomplishment of the school is also a significant improvement of interpersonal relations in various dependencies: teacher – pupil, teacher – teacher, pupil – pupil, teacher – parent. Another accomplishment is preparation of rules and standards of the school life, which are systematically monitored and modified, depending on the need. Furthermore, the school has prepared and implemented a social, professional and personal support system for teachers, pupils, parents and school employees.

### **Personal Development Programme**

The school's accomplishments within the scope of implementing life skills result from a properly prepared School Prevention Programme according to which health education is one of the basic tasks of the school. Teachers and tutors, implementing the programme above, transfer to children and youth the knowledge about health, shape proper skills, beliefs and stances within the scope of pro-healthy lifestyle which, in a long-term aspect, has an important relation to the quality of life of every person. Health education offers a possibility of developing proper hygienic, eating and leisure habits. Therefore, enabling the pupils to have a safe, healthy, active and creative life at school and outside of it is one of the most important tasks of the Personal Development Programme. Summing it up, it is possible to notice that its main target is acquisition of proper knowledge and information, shaping of life skills, development of beliefs and stances indispensable for preservation of own health and the health of others.

### **School Prevention Programme**

An important place within the scope of implementation and development of life skills is also played by the School Prevention Programme prepared by Complex of Comprehensive and Integration Schools No. 5 in Kraków (Sulisz, Śliwak, Wolska, Szalach and Wtorkiewicz).

It puts special emphasis on the shaping of pupils' personality, development of their skills within the scope of: saying "no" in risky situations, fighting off the pressure of the group (training of social and interpersonal skills), dealing with stress, effective searching for solutions to problematic situations, recognizing one's own strong and weak sides, making in-depth self-evaluation and building self-esteem, rational management of free time with special attention devoted to physical activity, provision of knowledge regarding persons and institutions which could offer assistance.

Assumptions of the School Prevention Programme are systematically implemented by tutors and all teachers within the scope of the subjects taught by them. They implement life skills by using, apart from the traditional ones, untypical forms and methods of work such as prophylactic theatre, drama with the presence of parents, workshops devoted to specific subjects conducted with the participation of pupils, parents and teachers.

Efficient implementation of life skills by teachers is possible thanks to constant improvement of their educational skills. Thanks to this, they can efficiently work with youth belonging to high risk groups, deal with stress and successfully prevent violence at home. The teachers also participate in workshops regarding educational activities within the scope of positive thinking, efficient communication along with elimination of submissive and aggressive behaviour and impact of addictive substances. Currently,

workshops are organized by the Centre for Education Development (<http://www.ore.edu.pl>; date of access: 09.12.2013).

Positive changes occurring at the school **within the scope of implementation of health education and life skills** are confirmed by an evaluation conducted by the Małopolska School Superintendent (Report 2013). According to the prepared Report, the evaluated areas regarding promotion of health implemented in Complex of Comprehensive and Integration Schools No. 5 meet a very high standard of requirements within the area of health education and implementation of life skills in such areas as “shaping team cooperation skills” and “shaping pupil stances.”

Very high assessment of the area “**shaping team cooperation skills**” results from cooperation and involvement of teachers in the work of educational teams, prophylactic teams and teams for promotion of health skills, as well as school promotion teams, teams for solving education and care problems, as well as preparation of projects. There are also subject-related teams. Teachers jointly diagnose the needs of the school community, plan activities in the school, jointly monitor and solve problems and perform evaluation of the undertaken activities. This is a system work, requiring creative involvement of teachers in promotion of health and implementation of health education within the scope of implementing life skills. The school also monitors the comfort of representatives of various school community groups. It applies the approach from “people to problems” in line with the Health Promoting School.

On the other hand, high assessment within the scope of “**shaping pupil stances**” mainly results from educational tasks of the Personal Development Programme and the School Prevention Programme. Their significant value is the fact that they are consistent and adequate for the needs of pupils, planned and modified in line with their needs and with their participation.

Effects of implementing life skills in the opinion of school employees

Whilst diagnosing the effects of implementing life skills in Complex of Comprehensive and Integration Schools No. 5 in Kraków, apart from analysis of documents, also interviews with selected school employees were conducted, who, according to the head master, are highly involved in implementation of the idea of the Health Promoting School. These were: a school teacher, a speech therapist and a librarian. Thanks to the conducted interviews, very interesting information was obtained.

The school teacher, when asked about life skills acquired during work at Complex of Comprehensive and Integration Schools No. 5 in Kraków and effects resulting from their acquisition, answered:

“Studies, mainly psychological, offered a solid theoretical basis for me. On the other hand, joining the health promoting school project, we participated in workshops and interpersonal training sessions which offered a possibility of practical acquisition, as well as “exercise” of the above-listed skills.

Teachers who participated in such training sessions shared their knowledge and skills with other teachers, as well as organized workshops also for pupils and parents. Work at our school is oriented at searching for solutions to the problems by using the possessed basis and potential and including people who wish us well. We are active in the local environment; we often show our accomplishments and encourage cooperation.

Tolerance and respect for individuality constitute important values. Our pupils are active and independent; they know their rights, they are able to express their opinions and to cooperate. Last year, an internal evaluation was conducted in the school, assessing the team cooperation skills – we obtained very high results in all categories. Teachers,

pupils, parents, administration and all school service members were assessed and this is also an important measure – the entire school community is involved.

A health promoting school is distinguished by relations and atmosphere that govern it. We know that a definite majority of pupils like our schools; parents speak very positively about it. A number of years ago, we introduced workshops by applying activating methods. Our pupils know well what this method consists of and willingly participate in classes.

During the education of parents, we also apply workshop methods. It is easier for us to introduce various changes, as people are not afraid of novelties; they accept challenges willingly. In the case of difficulties and problems, we apply methods which have been known for years from the concept of a health promoting school – diagnosis, selection of best solutions, looking for allies and a small step method.

In my case – I know how to talk to very difficult pupils and parents and I am able to control my emotions. I am capable of saying that I was wrong or that I do not know something. In our school, a person is important, not only knowledge.

Teachers are characterized by enthusiasm and cooperation skills. We support one another. We are aware of our strong and weak sides; we know what we have to work on.

My life skills which I assess on a high level, *inter alia* thanks to participation in activities undertaken within the scope of the Health Promoting Schools include: ability of cooperation in a group, efficient communication, active listening, “I” language, transfer and acceptance of feedback, assertiveness, compliance of verbal and non-verbal communication, solving of problems, conflicts, looking for alternative manners of problem solving, creative thinking, ability of diagnosing problems and looking for help, feeling of self-esteem, positive thinking, empathy, dealing with emotions, stress, difficult situations and pressure.

On the other hand, **effects** perceptible in the behaviour of pupils, parents and other teachers are as follows according to us:

- A significant part of pupils is able to cooperate effectively in a group, acting in such enterprises as: creation of educational projects, organization of school events, operation of school volunteer forces, vigorously operating Pupil Self-Government;
- A significant group of pupils is able to communicate properly both among themselves, as well as with teachers and parents; pupils are able to talk about their problems, they know where to find help and assistance, they feel safe at school;
- Pupils make correct decisions regarding spending of free time, physical activity, in majority they do not display risky behaviour;
- A very large group of pupils develops their interests, participates in competitions, talent promotions, presents the effects of their creativity, has faith in their skills;
- A large group of parents who communicate efficiently with teachers, accepts feedback and cooperates actively;
- A very large group of pupils and parents evaluates the atmosphere and the climate at school as friendly and conducive to good relations, which is confirmed by frequent visits of our graduates;
- A large group of parents cooperates within the scope of operation of the Parent Council; in many cases, cooperation of class tutors with parents is very successful; they are active, they solve problems and look for allies;
- Furthermore, a very significant part of graduates from our school is able to function well in new environments, there are no problems with establishing peer relations;

- Teachers support one another in difficult situations; when solving problems, they are open to novelties, they constantly improve their skills; they have a sense of humour and a lot of positive energy.”

The statements of the speech therapist and the teacher/ librarian were very similar to the statements of the school teacher. Both respondents stated unanimously: “Life skills that we acquired thanks to participation in the “Health Promoting School” programme are: critical and creative thinking, ability to recognize and solve problems, foreseeing the consequences of own activities, behaviour, setting realistic objectives, communicating, active listening, using the “I” language, solving conflicts, cooperating in a team and in a group, recognizing own strong and weak sides, feeling empathy, dealing with stress and emotions, awareness of factors determining a healthy life style.

In our opinion, work with using the acquired life skills offers tangible effects, such as:

- Better and quicker decision making and aiming for the target in the spirit of partnership;
- Establishing and maintaining partner relations with parents and increasing trust of parents with respect to teachers;
- Assistance for parents in identifying and hierarchizing their problems and undertaking activities aimed at solving them;
- Frequent applications of parents and pupils to teachers for assistance in solving school and personal problems (increased trust);
- Effective communication of pupils among themselves and with teachers;
- Increased tolerance of pupils with respect to handicapped people, other religions and nationalities and perceptible improvement of pupils’ personal etiquette;
- Decrease in the frequency of occurrence of risky behaviour (smoking cigarettes, drinking alcohol, drug usage);
- Increased responsibility for own health and health of others and the environment in which we live;
- Inoculation of an internal need of aiming for a pro-healthy life style (a growing group of pupils eats healthily, takes care of personal hygiene, participates in various forms of physical activity in the area of the school and outside of it); moreover, pupils choose the right stances, conducive to health.”

#### Recapitulation and Conclusions

According to the divagations above, health education implemented in Complex of Comprehensive and Integration Schools No. 5 in Kraków presents a modern holistic approach to the health of young people, understood as certain welfare which consists in aiming for complete satisfaction in social and psychical sphere and achieving general contentment with life. The school shapes a number of important life skills indispensable for functioning in the modern world, which refer to self-fulfillment, building self-esteem, adequate self-assessment, assertiveness, as well as dealing with difficult life situations. An important role in this activity is played by the teachers, who in Complex of Comprehensive and Integration Schools No. 5 are properly prepared not only by completing proper higher studies, but also by participating in systematic training sessions organized by the Centre for Education Development. The issue of preparing the teachers for activities within the scope of pro-health education was the object of empirical studies and theoretical divagations of W. Kulesza and M. Feiner (2002). At that time the authors emphasized that “the role of the teacher is perceived, by the majority of representatives of this environment, as consisting in promotion of information about health in the first place” (ibidem, p. 213). Accomplishments of the

school in the course of twenty years are therefore huge and comprehensive in numerous areas, as the above-quoted authors indicated that "majority of examined teachers (57.5%) evaluated the hitherto activities of the school within the scope of health protection and its promotion among pupils as insufficient in comparison to needs (Kulesza p. 212). Changes have occurred in the physical and social environment (human relations, atmosphere, dialogue, etc), in the policy and organization of work of the school in a manner that the teachers, pupils and parents feel well here. Ocetkiewicz (1999) writes in detail about dialogue-oriented teaching/ communicating which is indispensable in the modern school, as well as in the family home.

School is an authentic place for a dialogue, thanks to life skills acquired by the teachers. As a health promoting school, it has its own concept, strategy and model. This is a cooperating school, aiming for constant development, investing in improvement of teachers, pupils, as well as parents.

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